

Draco's Days of Darkness

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Potion, and, er, frogs

Draco's Days of Darkness

DISCLAIMER: I didn't create these characters. JK Rowling did.

EXCUSE: I didn't mean to write this story, it held a wand to my head and made me. Hope somebody out there enjoys it.. be warned it's pretty long

Malfoy stared balefully at Hermione Granger's retreating back. Her slap was still ringing in his ears. The second time! The second time she'd dared to hit him. "I'm going to make that Mudblood sorry," he muttered.

"Huh?" That was Goyle.

"Nothing. Shuddup Goyle, I have thinking to do."

Crabbe and Goyle waited respectfully.

The thinking took a few days; the end of that time found Malfoy on his way to Professor Snape's office feeling unusually nervous. He was going to have to lie very well indeed here-- fortunately lying was one of his specialist skills. Just relax, Draco, he told himself as he took a deep breath and opened Snape's door.

"Professor Snape -- uh,"

"Yes, Malfoy?" Snape sounded encouraging. Draco gained confidence.

"You know my father-- erm, he's really angry with me..."

"Why on earth?"

"Because Hermione Granger's always top in everything!" Draco blurted. That was true. He didn't have to fake the upset in his voice. "And I was wondering, maybe I could do an extra project with you, get some extra credit, so I could beat Granger in just one thing... then, maybe, I really want my Dad to be proud of me, he wants me to be a credit to Slytherin, sir..." His voice trailed off.

Draco didn't dare look up. But Snape sounded sympathetic rather than suspicious. "We'll see what we can do, Malfoy."

Half an hour later Draco was clutching *Moste Potente Potions* close to his chest and grinning. He might have a six-roll-of parchment essay on *The Theory and Practise of Advanced Potion Making* to write, but he'd also got himself his own personal dungeon to use as a lab and this book.

Granger won't know what's hit her, he thought as he leafed through the pages, his grin widening at some of the more unpleasant illustrations.

Literally, he added mentally as he found the page headed "The Polyjuice Potion."

#

21 days later, Harry and Ron emerged from the Potions classroom, scowling furiously. Snape had made them stay behind to clean Stickiness Solution off the floor. It had taken forever.

"Malfoy's worse than ever," Ron seethed. "I saw him, he was waiting to jog your elbow. He was plotting to make you spill that stuff! Hasn't he got anything to do with his time except annoy us?"

"Nng" answered Harry, and fell gently backwards into Crabbe's waiting arms.

"Wha-- nnng" said Ron, as he too got hit very hard on the back of the head. Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other, and forced some Sleeping Solution down their victims' throats before carrying them unconscious to Malfoy's dungeon..

Harry and Ron were deposited ungentlely on the floor, beside a pile of manacles which had been stolen from Filch's office. Crabbe stared at the unconscious pair considerably for a second before pulling a pair of tweezers out from his robes. He knelt down over Harry's motionless form, and pulled some of the hair out from his head.

"Well done, Crabbe..." drawled Draco from a corner. He dropped the hairs into a glass of viscous liquid in front of him. It sizzled and hissed and turned turquoise blue.

Draco made a face and drained it at a gulp. "Look after those two till I get back," he told Crabbe and Goyle after he'd stopped shuddering and gasping. He hurried off.

Crabbe and Goyle gaped after him.

#

"Hermione!" Harry came rushing towards her looking out of breath and nervous.

"What's up with you?"

"Come with me-- I've got to show you something!"

"What?"

"Not here-- just come."

"Is it at Hagrid's?" asked Hermione, for they were hurrying through the grounds in that direction. "He hasn't got another dragon, has he?"

"No, it's not another dragon," said Harry, looking furious for some reason. "Anyway"-- he stopped. "It's in here."

"HARRY! That's the Forbidden Forest! We can't--"

"We will. Trust me, Hermione."

"Of-- of course I trust you, Harry," said Hermione. She flushed guiltily, wondering why just for a second she hadn't.

"Then c'mon!" said Harry.

Hermione followed him.

#

Draco didn't know what to do next. He'd originally meant just to give Granger a good scare-- do the Leg-Locker curse on her and threaten to leave her in the Forest, maybe even really leave her in the Forest. But, he suddenly decided, that isn't enough. He wanted to humiliate Granger, not just scare her. And he knew the perfect way of doing that-- if the way she'd just been stammering and blushing at him was anything to go by.

"Hermione," whispered Draco hoarsely.

Hermione looked scared. "Yes, Harry?"

"Hermione, I have to ask you, do you... do you have feelings for me?"

Hermione backed up against a tree. She looked almost horrified. "Of course I do, Harry, you're one of my best friends..."

Draco cursed mentally. Pump up the pressure a bit, he thought. He stepped closer to Hermione, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Hermione, if you care for me at all, I have to know now... I'm going mad without you... please..." he leaned forward, staring urgently into her eyes. Hermione looked very very unsettled-- then her eyes widened -- she opened her mouth...

She shrieked ear-splittingly and kicked him away. He landed sprawled on the forest floor. So she is an ice queen after all, he thought. But Hermione was still shrieking at him, and now he could make out

words: "It's YOU!" Draco put up his hand to touch his hair. It was, indeed, him.

"LOCOMOTOR MORTIS!" screamed Hermione, pulling her wand out of her robes.

Draco's legs were suddenly glued together.

"Ha!" said Hermione triumphantly. "I got the idea off you!"

Draco's whole body stiffened in shock. She can read minds, he thought, no wonder she always knows the answers to teachers' questions...

Hermione was still talking. "Doing it on Neville in first year like that, you evil little scum. And now..." She marched towards where Draco lay, grabbed his wand out of his robes and threw it away. "... can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't just leave you lying there like that and walk off?"

Great minds think alike, thought Draco admiringly. But he didn't say so aloud, he didn't think it would help his case.

"Well?" snapped Hermione. She started to walk away.

"Hermione!" called Draco desparately. "I... I love you."

"WHAT?"

"Yes," Draco was getting into his stride now. "I knew you'd never look at a Slytherin like me, and I thought you were in love with Potter, and I knew that the only way I'd ever get near you was--"

"To take Polyjuice Potion and turn into Harry?"

Draco gasped weakly. How did she know about Polyjuice Potion? He was starting to feel really befuddled.

"That's right," he muttered, not daring to look up into Hermione's eyes.

"For your information, Malfoy," hissed Hermione suddenly, "A: I am not in love with Harry Potter; B: The reason I'd never look at you is not because you're a Slytherin but because you're a nasty, low-down, evil, scheming, foulminded..."

"It's the same thing" interrupted Draco.

Hermione almost grinned, he saw, but caught herself in time.

"and, and C:" she floundered; she'd lost track. "C: I am not in love with Harry Potter!"

"You already said that one Hermione" said Draco innocently.

"That's 'Mudblood' to you," snapped back Hermione. "And I'm not. He's already got a girlfriend, Cho and he are perfect for each other..."

"Yeah, right" snickered Draco, "last time they played Quidditch together she pretended to fall off her broom to distract him from the Snitch."

"Well, at least she didn't try to push him off his!" retorted Hermione.

"Well I would have done it Cho's way but I didn't think he'd come to rescue me," murmured Draco.

"What am I doing talking to you?" said Hermione coming to her senses. "You're a piece of slime Malfoy. You could have killed him."

"I'll never do anything like that again. Please, Hermione..." Draco too had suddenly remembered where he was.

"And you have the NERVE to say you're in love with me! You couldn't love anyone except yourself. I mean, of all the mean tricks to play on anyone, what you just did to me was..." She stopped suddenly, looking horrified. "AND WHAT DID YOU DO TO HARRY? WHAT BIT OF HIM DID YOU USE? WHERE IS HE?"

Hermione was suddenly towering over Draco, her wand pointing at his heart as he cringed on the ground.

"Calm down, please." he whispered. "Um, they're in the dungeons, with Crabbe and Goyle."

Hermione gasped.

"They're quite safe" added Draco hastily. Hermione was about to shriek again, he could tell.

"THEY? RON TOO? AND YOU LEFT THEM WITH THOSE... THUGS... IN A DUNGEON?" Hermione stopped, and slowed down. "If Crabbe and Goyle have harmed so much as a hair of their heads" she said in a harsh whisper that sounded like she'd learnt it from Professor Snape on a bad day, "I'll ... I'll report you to the Headmaster!"

Draco gulped. He was thinking about the tweezers.

"Now show me where they are! This INSTANT!"

She marched him at wandpoint back to the school.

#

When they turned up in Malfoy's dungeon, both of them gasped in surprise. Crabbe and Goyle were sleeping peacefully on the floor, manacled back-to-back. Harry and Ron were standing over them glowering. Harry spun round as they entered the room.

"Malfoy, you..." he spat, but then, seeing Hermione behind Draco: "Hermione! Are you OK?"

"I'm fine." That was a lie-- she felt wobbly and upset, but there were more important topics to discuss. "How did you get the better of those two goons?"

"Ron woke up while they were trying work out how to manacle me--"

"-- I sneaked up behind them with that cauldron, and hit them on the head--"

"-- and then he fed them some of their own Sleeping Solution!" finished Harry, looking admiringly at Ron.

"There's something really gloopy spilled on the floor now, be careful where you walk." Ron changed the subject blushingly.

"It's Polyjuice Potion," said Hermione grimly. "He was using it." She gave Malfoy a kick, and he stumbled forward.

"Polyjuice Potion?" Harry was flabbergasted. "We knew he was up to something of course, we were waiting here to catch him, but-- what was he using it for? Who did he turn into?"

Hermione could feel herself turning bright red. She suddenly realised that she didn't want anyone to know what had happened in the Forest, almost as badly as Malfoy didn't. Malfoy in love with me, she thought, I'd be the laughing stock of Gryffindor. And: what made him think I'm in love with Harry?

"He turned into you," she admitted. "I.... I think he was trying to spy out your Quidditch tactics."

"Yeah," said Malfoy suddenly. "I was trying to get Hermione to lead me to your common room, to find out what you're up to in the next match, y'know, but I turned back into me before I got there." He looked round at Hermione and winked.

"Lucky for you, because if you'd got into our common room I would have had to kill you.. It's part of the Gryffindor oath." Harry's voice was icy; it didn't sound like a bluff. Malfoy looked terrified. "As it is, I think we'll just report you to McGonagall and to Madam Hooch. Hermione's a witness. I expect you'll be expelled."

Malfoy looked coolly round at Hermione. He had already recovered his composure. Here he stands, thought Hermione furiously, in a dark dungeon surrounded by his worst enemies, one of whom is pointing a wand at him, another is threatening to get him expelled, and he's acting as if he's the one holding all the cards! You could almost admire him-- no, she hastily scratched that thought. Anyway he did have one or two aces up his sleeve. He could tell McGonagall she'd gone into the Forest with him. He could tell Harry--

"Uh Harry, let's not do that."

Harry and Ron looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "Why not?" asked Harry quietly and Ron very loudly, both at the same time.

"Because..." Hermione cast her mind around desperately... "he could be useful." She took a deep breath. "We all know the Dark Side's gaining strength again, and his Dad is a tool of You-Know-Who's." Malfoy grunted something indiscriminate; Ron motioned threateningly at him and he shut up again. Hermione continued.

"At the very least we should keep him here at Hogwart's where we can

keep an eye on him. And we might be able to use him to gather information."

Malfoy didn't look so cool anymore, she noticed with satisfaction.

#

Draco's mind was struggling frantically and uselessly, like a rat in a trap. He hadn't felt like this since last year's Transfiguration exam. He couldn't betray his father, but then his father would be very unimpressed if he got expelled. And the Cause might need him at Hogwarts one day...

I suppose I can just lie to them, he thought; but to his dismay he heard Hermione using the words "truth-telling charm." The three Gryffindors had their heads together and were conferring in rapid whispers; Ron had his right fist clenched and kept making dramatic and violent gestures with it. Finally Hermione turned and levelled her wand at Draco.

"Veritastic!" she said.

Draco felt suddenly naked, and looked down rapidly to check. He was still dressed.

"Check it's working!" he heard Harry hissing.

"Draco, who's the better Quidditch player, you or Harry?" asked Hermione.

Draco opened his mouth to say that of course it was him, Potter just had all the luck and a better broomstick; and listened in horror to what came out: "Potter. He's far better than me. I mean, I'm pretty good. But he's a genius. I wish I knew how he did it."

Ron collapsed in laughter; Harry and Hermione were also snorting slightly.

"Will you look at his FACE!" howled Ron.

All three of them did, and Harry and Hermione also broke down in giggles. Draco was burning with humiliation and rage.

"I don't think he faked that," said Hermione when she finally recovered.

"We should test it a bit more, though," said Ron with an evil smirk. He turned to Draco. "Malfoy, tell us who you're most in luurve w..."

"Let's get down to business Ron!" snapped Hermione. "Anyway, we know the answer, it's Draco Malfoy." She rounded on Draco.

"Here's the deal, Malfoy. You tell us everything you can about your father's connection to the Dark Side. I mean everything. Otherwise, you get expelled. Deal?" Draco stared hopelessly at each of the three Gryffindors. He looked longest at Hermione but she didn't blink or move. She meant it, he decided.

"OK," he whispered. Shame overwhelmed him, hotter and fiercer by far than before. "But I don't know much. Something's going to happen here, at Hogwarts, after the holidays." He tried to stop at that but his mouth kept motoring. "Dumbledore's the target. Potter's probably in danger as well, he usually is isn't he? But I swear I don't know the details. My father told me to stay out of it and stay out of trouble if I knew what was good for me." He gave a short cynical laugh at the last part and looked up to see the Gryffindors white-faced and shaking.

Hermione recovered first. "We'll give you exactly one week to find out the details. Write letters, bribe servants, I don't care what you do. We'll meet you here for a progress report after dinner tomorrow. Agreed?"

She waited for his weak "Yes" before turning to Harry and Ron.

"I've had enough of this place. You two go unmanacle the sleeping beauties over there, and we can leave."

"As my lady commands," said Ron with a mocking bow. They went.

Hermione moved closer to Draco, staring at him intently. Uh-oh, thought Draco, here it comes...

"Tell me Malfoy, did you really pull that Polyjuice trick because you're in love with me?"

"Yes!" squealed Draco. "I really did!"

The two of them stared at each other in mute and mutual astonishment. Then Draco passed out.

#

He came round to see Crabbe and Goyle staring down at him. The Gryffindors had gone.

"D'you know what happened'?" demanded Crabbe. "We can't remember anything."

"No... I don't remember either," said Draco. At least the Truth Charm had worn off, he thought, relieved.

"Well, did you get Granger?" persisted Crabbe.

"I don't think so... I feel awful, I'm going to bed.."

Draco hauled himself to his feet, and made his way wearily to the Slytherin dormitory.

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged puzzled glances.

#

Hermione also went to bed very early. She had too much to think about, she told Harry and Ron, who though tshe was making plans for Malfoy and nodded understandingly. But they didn't know the half of it, she thought bitterly. She wished there was someone she could

confide in, but Harry was out for obvious reasons and Ron would probably just laugh. Even worse, he might tell his brothers. Hermione shuddered at the thought of Fred and George Weasley finding out Malfoy was in love with her. Or if anyone found out she was in love with Harry.

There she'd admitted it to herself. It hadn't hurt that much. And if Malfoy had realised presumably others had too. It was probably common knowledge in the common room, Harry and Cho probably laughed about it while they were alone together...

Well, at least I've got Malfoy to fall back on, she thought to herself in the dark, and chuckled. Malfoy in love with her! It was so bizarre it was funny. She imagined Malfoy's family's reaction if she was introduced to them as Draco's girlfriend... fiancee? A Mudblood daughter-in-law, wouldn't Lucius Malfoy just love that! Hermione snickered silently. How could Draco be in love with her? He must have gone mad.

#

Draco didn't understand how he could be in love with Hermione Granger. He must have gone mad. She was a Mudblood for goodness sake, practically the best friend of Harry Potter whom he hated, she was bossy and ill-mannered and she had too much hair.

"I hate her," he muttered into the darkness. The darkness didn't seem convinced. Draco sighed. He was in love with a Mudblood. He felt that the truth-telling charm had let loose a monster, he couldn't control it or kill it or do anything with it.

And he had betrayed his father. Why had he done that? He wasn't a traitor, he'd rather be expelled a million times over. It was because Hermione had asked him to, because she'd wanted him to. Draco felt so ashamed of his weakness he could howl.

And even worse-- the thought kept creeping up on him-- why had he fallen in love with her in the first place? Wasn't it because she was bossy and bad-mannered, because she'd even dared to hit him? He'd never succeeded in his attempts to intimidate her.

Draco buried his face in his pillow. This was all the fault of that blasted Truth Charm. Torture would be better than this.

#

It was a subdued and chastened Malfoy who met the three Gryffindors in the dungeons the next evening. He had dark circles under his eyes and was paler than ever; for the first time Hermione felt a flash of sympathy for him.

He met Harry and Ron's eyes defiantly enough, but avoided looking at Hermione.

"Listen, you told me it was spy on my family or get expelled, right?"

"Well, I'd rather get expelled. Go ahead and report me." He still didn't look at Hermione.

"What, no tricks, no insults, no..." Harry looked round.. "thugs waiting in the corner to beat us up? Just 'Report me'?"

"Yeah," Malfoy drawled. "You won. Be happy. The great famous Harry Potter wins again. Harry Potter of the scar, Quidditch champion, the one who faced the Dark Lord and lived, I must ahve been mad to take you on." His intonations were rising rapidly. "What have I got against what you've got? Of course you've won. Now get out of here." The drawl ended up in a squeak.

They didn't move.

"Go on," he said fiercely.

"Draco," said Hermione, you're crying." He looked at her then, and she was astounded by the sheer hatred on his face. He let out a sob and she went over and awkwardly put her arms around him. She motioned to Harry and Ron to leave-- they did so reluctantly.

Hermione sighed. Did they really think she couldn't defend herself against this mess? Draco's head was on her shoulder and he was clinging onto her tightly.

"Tell me about it, Draco," she said.

"I'm afraid to," said Draco. "But don't leave me yet, please," he added as Hermione shifted impatiently.

"You've messed up my life, Granger," he said finally. "You're a Mu-- a Muggle-born. I'm supposed to despise you. And I'm afraid you're going to force me to betray my father and my heritage, and..." he trailed off.

"Force you?" said Hermione. "You just said you'd rather get expelled. It's your choice, how can I force you?"

"Draco looked at her. His mouth worked but nothing came out for a bit.

"By asking me to," he said eventually.

Hermione was completely stunned. She had no idea what to say or do, which could be why she did the first thing that came into her head: she lifted Draco's face toward her, and kissed him hard.

#

Draco kissed back of course; he couldn't help it. He also couldn't believe it. What had come over Hermione?

He pulled away from her abruptly. "Did you just do that out of pity?" he demanded. And pointing his wand at her he cried "VERITASTIC!"

"No," answered Hermione. She looked almost cross-eyed with surprise, Draco could see why the others had laughed at him so much yesterday.

"Then why?"

"Because I've secretly liked you for ages, I like the way you don't have any rules..."

Hermione looked aghast. Draco was enjoying this turning of the tables. He opened his mouth for the next question but Hermione forestalled him with "Please stop doing this to me Draco, it's cruel."

"Tough," he said, "you knew what I was like before you started kissing me. Tell me about Potter, I thought you liked him."

"I do!" howled Hermione. "And a lot of the things I like about him are the same things I like about you... except he's brave and good and kind to animals and you're..."

"Dangerous?" enquired Draco sardonically.

"Yeah..." Hermione looked disgusted with herself. Draco didn't blame her. "Are you in love?" he asked her.

"Yes."

With me, or with him? wondered Draco. But he didn't dare to ask. "You're a mess, Granger." he told her.

"You can talk!" she retorted.

Draco started laughing hysterically and Hermione joined in. Neither of them wanted to say the next thing but eventually Hermione did.

"Now what?"

"We could run away together..." said Draco thoughtfully. "And mess up my revision timetable? I think not!" said Hermione. "Anyway, it's alright for you with your rich parents. But my whole life will be messed up if I get expelled."

"Hermione," said Draco patiently, "my parents would cut me off without a penny if I ran off with a Mudblood-- no offence. And of course you're right, it is a stupid idea. Have you got any better ones?"

Hermione shrugged and reached to kiss him again. "I'll meet you back here tomorrow."

"This is Our Dungeon-- how very romantic," said Draco looking round the darkness at the slimy and crumbling brickwork, the menacing shadows that flickered on the walls.

Hermin hardly seemed to hear him. She was looking grim again. "And Draco-- that thing you didn't want to do? I AM asking you to do it. I don't care about your loyalties, they're just not as important as innocent lives."

Draco sank to the floor and buried his face in his hands as Hermione walked out.

#

Hermione made her way towards the Gryffindor common room where Harry and Ron were waiting impatiently for her.

"Well?" asked Ron as soon as she walked in.

With horror Hermione realised she was still under the Truth spell. She wanted to blurt out everything. She managed to hold it in till she got over to where the boys were sitting, and then bent down to them and said "He likes me," in a very low voice.

"WHAT!" yelled both of them together.

"Ssh, Malfoy fancies me. He was crying because he doesn't want to."

"Doesn't want to what?" asked Ron, puzzled.

"Doesn't want to be in love with me... I asked him... look this is going to take a while, can we go somewhere else and discuss it?"

"They found a disused classroom where Harry and Ron wormed the entire story out of her-- the Truth Spell saw to that. Everything except her being half in love with Harry; she saw it had occurred to both of them but neither was willing to ask.

"So-- you're going to entice Draco into revealing enemy secrets, Hermione?" said Ron eventually. "You're mad you know. And you're miles too good for him."

"I know," she said.

#

Draco took his head out of his hands in the dungeons, and gasped.

Crabbe and Goyle were looming over him. They looked extremely big from his position on the floor, bigger than he'd ever realised before.

"Traitor!" growled Goyle, whose face was ashen.

"Two syllables, Gregory, very well done indeed," drawled Draco, but his heart wasn't really in it, and the drawl was quite shaky.

"We knew you were up to something," said Crabbe, who was slightly better at whole sentences than Goyle was. "So we came down here and listened at the door. But we didn't expect-- all that," he trailed off lamely, words evidently having failed him.

"TREACHERY!" bellowed Goyle, staring menacingly at Draco. You had to hand it to Goyle, thought Draco-- it might be hard to get an idea into his head, but once it got there it stuck.

He wondered if there was any way of salvaging this situation, and decided fatalistically that it wasn't even worth trying.

"So what are you going to do about it?" he asked them, knowing it was a stupid question.

Crabbe looked at Goyle.

"Kick him," said Goyle.

They did.

#

Harry, Ron and Hermione noticed that Malfoy wasn't at breakfast the next morning, and heard a rumour that he'd gone to the sick bay. The same rumour also said he'd been beaten up; people kept looking at Harry and Ron with unabashed nosiness. Harry and Ron for their part were eyeing Hermione questioningly; she didn't know whether they thought she'd done it or they were just checking she wasn't more upset than she should be.

Over at the Slytherin table, Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be in a very mean mood indeed and were also shooting dark looks towards where the three of them sat. Some other Gryffindors saw this and formed a sort of bodyguard around Harry and Ron to usher them out of the hall.

Hermione trailed behind, lost in thought. There were plenty of people who might have attacked Malfoy if they could get away with it. But when did they get the chance? He always had Crabbe and Goyle with him anyway.. not last night though. Someone must have followed him to the dungeon-- had anyone found out what he was up to?

She felt a large meaty hand on her shoulder, and spun around to stare into Goyle's piggy eyes. Well, that's that question answered, she thought as they forced the Sleeping Solution down her throat.

#

She came to in Malfoy's dungeon. Manacles were gleaming on her wrists and ankles. Crabbe and Goyle were standing over her, holding their wands.

"What did you do to him Mudblood?" demanded Goyle. He seemed close to tears. "Did you put a spell on him? Tell us so we can take it off!"

"Nmmmg" said Hermione. This was too much to deal with when her mind was still fogged from the Sleeping Solution.

"Did he tell you anything?" said Crabbe. He was calmer than Goyle but no less scary. "Tell us everything he told you. Right away. Or you'll regret it."

"He didn't tell me anything!" Hermione said quickly, making an effort to gather her wits. "He only said he was going to. I think he might have been plotting something against Harry, I don't believe he meant it. I don't believe he really cares about me at all. But I'm not going to be fooled by him!" Her voice was shrill.

An expression of relief passed across Goyle's face, quickly succeeded by one of suspicion. "D'you think she's telling us the truth?" he demanded of Crabbe.

"Malfoy might do that," said Crabbe slowly. "But he would have told us if he was up to anything. Naah.. I think she's hiding something. Tell us," he turned to Hermione, "or I turn you into a frog... a little bit at a time." With an evil chuckle he pointed the wand at Hermione's feet.

"NOOOOO!" a voice shrieked from the doorway. Malfoy dived at Crabbe, trying to push the wand away from Hermione, but succeeded only in altering its direction-- so that the curse shot directly at Hermione's heart.

"Ribbit," said Hermione.

A largish frog squatted where she had been a moment before.

#

Draco staggered. He couldn't believe what he had just done. Hermione was staring at him reproachfully-- or was that a frog's normal expression? He couldn't be sure.

Get a grip, Malfoy, he thought.

"You FOOL!" he shouted at Crabbe with a very genuine fury in his voice. "How's she going to tell us anything in this state?"

"But you..." protested Crabbe weakly.

"Of course I did!" he raged. "I wanted her to TRUST me! She's very close to Potter, you know how important he is... When are you two going to LEARN that violence should only ever be used as a last resort? Deceit is twenty times more effective..."

Crabbe and Goyle looked dumbfounded by this concept, but they didn't have to contemplate it for long. At that moment Harry Potter and Ron Weasley burst through the door, Ron yelling furiously "I KNEW IT!"

They had the element of surprise and had no trouble disarming the Slytherins. Both of them were shaking with rage. "I knew he was up to no good, the filthy little toerag," ranted Ron in a rage. He thrust his wand at Draco. "Where is she, where's Hermione, what have you done with her..."

"Ribbit" said a very small voice, and the frog hopped onto Ron's shoe.

It was one of the worst moments of Draco's life, he thought afterwards. He didn't know how Weasley had recognised her straight away, but he had-- Crabbe and Goyle were squatting on the ground getting in touch with their amphibious side in a matter of seconds, and the wand had been pointing at Draco's heart when Weasley stopped, and froze...

"What are you waiting for?" asked Harry.

"Harry..." whispered Ron unhappily, "we have to take the Frog Charm off Hermione."

Draco remembered too. Hope dawned on him. But it seemed that Harry

was still in the dark.

"Potter," said Draco when Ron didn't speak, "to take the charm off Hermione she'll have to be kissed by someone she's in love with."

"So we need him," said Ron looking at Draco with hatred.

"What happens if they're not in love with anyone?" asked Harry.

"Oh, then their mum can do it," said Ron. He was still staring at Draco.

"And what if they've got no mum?" said Harry. He was looking at Hermione who was resting peacefully in Ron's hand.

"Then they stay a frog until they fall in love with someone," said Ron impatiently. "Usually it's another frog, but sometimes a really attractive tasty-looking fly will do. It happened my second-cousin Gregory, we spent days carrying him round the Reptile House at the Zoo, then he ate Charlie's pet stick insect and turned back instantly with the legs still sticking out of his mouth..."

"Weasley, shut up," said Draco harshly. He couldn't believe it, the Gryffindors were babbling like babies while Hermione was sitting there being a frog. The air was crackling with some kind of tension, they seemed to be trying to put off the moment. "We have to get Hermione better."

"Er-- oh yeah," said Ron. "Malfoy-- pucker up and kiss that frog. Do it now!" He jabbed his wand into Draco's chest and Draco bent over to kiss Hermione.

Nothing happened.

Draco was devastated. "It's your job then Potter," he whispered, and tried not to let them see him crying.

Harry kissed Hermione.

Nothing continued to happen.

The three of them looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Er-- Lockhart's in Romania isn't he?" said Ron.

"Her mum's a Muggle, she really won't like this..." said Harry.

"Weasley, you try," said Draco through his tears.

"Me?" Ron seemed very nervous.

"Yes-- YOU!" Draco had forgotten that Ron was the one with the wand. "Do it NOW, Weasley!"

Ron looked nervously at Harry.

"You might as well," said Harry softly. He was looking from Ron to

Hermione in Ron's hand. He seemed completely poleaxed, but not unhappy to be so.

Ron kissed the frog-- a second later he was kissing Hermione. She was clinging onto him for dear life and sobbing "Oh Ron!"

Ron was crying too. Draco was distraught with jealousy, and Harry's eyes were also wet. Only Crabbe and Goyle, hopping forgotten round the dungeon floor, were not in tears.

Hermione eventually let go of Ron and turned towards Draco.

"I'm really sorry."

Draco wanted to be noble and forgiving in return but couldn't trust himself to carry it off. "It was fun while it lasted, anyway," he managed eventually in a drawl. "And Hermione-- you've taught me that all my wealth and all my boasting-- and even my incredible good looks-- aren't enough for a self-centred pig like me to attract a woman worth loving." His smile was ironic but he was crying again.

"You're not as bad as you pretend to be," said Hermione almost absently. "You'd be almost human if it weren't for your father."

Draco felt furious, but with his father more than with Hermione.

"Sometimes I think you're lucky to be an orphan, Potter," he said to Harry, and stepped backwards with his hands up as Harry swung a fist at him.

"Hit me if you like, Potter, I meant it."

Harry gave him a level stare but stopped moving towards him. "You're scum, Malfoy, and I'm never going to like you. But you said once you'd work with us. Are you willing to? You're sneaky and dishonest enough to be a good double agent."

Draco glanced briefly at Hermione. "I can work with you-- I still hate your guts though Potter."

Harry held out his hand and Draco took it and shook it reluctantly, the two of them exchanging hard stares at the same time. Hermione and Ron were still embracing.

"Can those two on the floor understand us?" Draco asked Hermione, suddenly remembering.

Hermione shuddered. "No-- when I was a frog all I could think about was catching flies on my tongue. And Ron, of course." She squeezed Ron's arm. He flushed scarlet.

Draco sighed. He turned back to Harry. "I can't find anything out till the holidays," he told him. "I'll try then to get enough information that we can try and stop whatever's going to happen. Or die in the attempt which is much more probable, this is something big."

"Do that," said Harry shortly.

Draco turned to Ron. "Weasley-- look after Hermione for me."

"No-- I'll look after her for *her*" said Ron. The three turned to go. "You deal with those." He jerked his head towards the croaking Crabbe and Goyle. The Gryffindors left.

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Hermione leaned on Ron's arm as they left. She was still feeling wobbly from her frog experience, normally she wouldn't appreciate someone saying he'd look after her, but now she could barely muster a token flash of indignation.

What an idiot I've been, she thought, getting infatuated with Harry, getting entangled with Draco-- Draco! when Ron was there all along. She sensed Ron's gentle support as they walked, and she smiled and Ron smiled back at her. There's something so straightforward about Ron, she realised, he'll never need a Truth Charm to find out his own secrets...

The Truth Charm! She knew something had been nagging at her. What had she said? About Draco? and Harry?

She pulled away from Ron abruptly.

"Excuse me-- I forgot something."

Ron looked alarmed.

"Don't worry, I'll be back in a minute."

She smiled at Ron but he still looked scared. She ran back along the passage towards Draco's dungeon.

#

Draco looked disgustedly at the hopping Crabbe and Goyle. I'll put them in a box and post them back to their mothers, he thought. The Goyle frog was looking at him imploringly but he firmly ignored it. He scooped one up in each hand and turned to go.

At the door he ran into a panting Hermione.

"Draco-- what did I say under the truth charm?" she asked him.

Draco sighed with resignation.

"You more or less told me you loved Weasley. I was an idiot not to see it." he said.

"No I didn't!" said Hermione. "Unless you put a Memory Charm on me. Did you?" She looked threatening but Draco was past caring.

"Yes you did. You said you liked me for being dangerous and having no rules. That isn't actually love." This was said in the weary tone of an unwilling expert on the subject. "You said you liked Potter for the same reasons you liked me. Ergo, you don't love him either. But

you are in love. You said so. So who's the obvious candidate with Potter out of the way? Use logic, Granger. I thought that was your strong point."

Draco was angry again. He felt very tired.

"Just go away, Hermione, you make my head ache."

Hermione looked like she wanted to comfort him but thought better of it. She ran off looking happy.

Draco was left alone in the dark with Crabbe and Goyle. He heard a piteous croak and looked down at his left hand.

"Yeah, unrequited love is a bummer, isn't it Goyle?" he said.

"Ribbit," implored Goyle from the palm of Draco's hand.

Draco relented. He looked around in every direction. No one was in sight. "If you ever tell anyone about this Goyle, I'll turn you *back* into a frog and then stamp on you," he said.

He lifted his hand to his face and kissed his second frog of the evening. Suddenly Goyle was standing there, large as life and twice as ugly. Draco jumped back hastily.

"What happened?" said Goyle looking confused. "Believe me," said Draco sourly, "you're better off not knowing."

THE END

Hermione looked deep into Ron's brown eyes. At once the world made sense again.

THE OTHER END

End
file.